

Thank you for our being born in the latter part of the 20th Century, when infant mortality is low, when polio, smallpox, T.B., diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, and rickets are rare; when every day there is a new and more successful treatment for cancer and MS and MD and SIDS and even AIDS.

Thank you for this table before us, groaning under the weight of platters piled high with food — food which we will eat until we are bloated and miserable, lying about the living room belching and farting and complaining that we haven't an iota of space left over for dessert, and the kitchen is filled with enough left-overs to feed half of Ethiopia.

Thank you, especially, God, for our being born middle-class, Protestant, and white, so that we may never suffer the afore-mentioned diseases and deprivations, the pain of prejudice and persecution, and the agony of concentration camps, pogroms, mass graves, and genocide.

THE CRIMINAL MENTALITY

It was still daylight
when I hurried into the downtown mall
on my way home from work.
Montgomery Ward was having a sale
and I wanted a specific item —
a cotton nightshirt with Garfield
in high-top sneakers on the front,
a snide remark about jogging
issuing from his mouth
in a cloud-shaped balloon.
My daughter who deeply resents
having to walk half a block
to her parked car
would love it.

The cashier in Lingerie was young
and flustered, having trouble with an exchange
while three more customers
waited impatiently.
I took the nightshirt next door
to Mens' Wear
where the smiling cashier was free
and no customers were waiting.
When I took out my Visa Card,
he said in awkward English, patting the register,
"This machine she don't do credit cards."
As I was questioning the validity

of this remarkable statement
a sour-faced floor manager appeared
and explained that the cashier "didn't
do credit cards."

I asked him if he could ring up my purchase,
and, his station in life having been
grossly insulted, he curtly directed me
to Ladies' Dresses.

The cashier in Ladies' Dresses
was plump and motherly — almost in tears
as she explained that her register
had jammed and she was waiting for Maintenance
("and you know how long they can take, dear!").
She suggested I try Linens, across the aisle.

I noticed through the glass mall doors
that it was growing dark —
my ride had reluctantly dropped me off
only after I assured her
I would be in and out in a flash
and on my way home via public bus
before the sun had set
over one of the worst parts of town.

In Linens there was no cashier at all.
I rushed a passing clerk,
waving the nightshirt like a flag of truce.
But she only worked in Cosmetics
and was not authorized
to handle the Linens register.
She promised to locate the correct clerk
who was probably on her dinner break.
I waited 20 minutes.
Nobody came.

I returned to Lingerie,
hoping the line had thinned.
Instead, at least half a dozen irate customers
were waiting — each with an exchange
or a return.
I laid out the exact change, including tax,
on the counter, and explained to the cashier
that I desperately needed to catch a bus,
that no other departments could help me,
and that I didn't need a bag or a receipt.
Without looking up, she snapped,
"Why don't you go to the end of the line
and wait your turn like everybody else!?"
"Everybody else" looked at me
as if I were street scum
or mentally retarded
or carried an Oozie in my shopping bag.

I felt something — like a tightly-wound rubber band — snap inside my head.
I held the nightshirt aloft
on its plastic hanger, and yelled,
"I would like to buy this item —
does anyone here want to take my money?"
The Lingerie clerk ignored me.
Customers stared.
I headed for the entrance to the store,
holding up the nightshirt and announcing
to the air that I would be perfectly happy
to pay for it if someone would let me.
The girls in Cosmetics were busy
trying on new nail enamels.
No one made a move to stop me.

I walked through the entire mall,
nightshirt flung over my shoulder,
price tags and plastic hanger flapping,
passing shoppers, store clerks,
armed mall guards.
When I reached the main doors,
I turned to give them one last chance —
shouting as loud as I could,
"I am taking this nightshirt with me
and I am not paying for it!"
Nothing happened.

I stepped out into the moonless night
and hurried to the nearest bus alcove.
I laid the nightshirt across my lap
so, like a weapon, it could not be
labelled "concealed."
I was not afraid —
of the groups of slouching low-riders
hanging around the alcove,
ghetto-blasters the size of microwaves
at maximum volume,
of the reeking old drunk out cold
on the opposite bench,
the crotch of his filthy pants
dark with urine,
of the leather-skinned, disoriented
bag ladies, fat in their layers of
trash-bin clothes,
mumbling and swearing to themselves
as they roamed the streets
carrying everything they owned
in shopping bags not unlike mine.

I felt a kinship with them all —
I, too, was now a lawbreaker, an outcast,
an untouchable.
I realized then how thin the line

between us is —
all it takes to break it
is the right set of
circumstances.

— Catherine Lynn

Long Beach CA

THE MAN IN THE MOON

My pregnant woman's body
has marks and spots, red scars
and black dots, moles and
rainbow bands that stretch
far, as fast as life.
Pocks and pits.
Crevices and craters.

She is my moon,
bombarded by microscopic bits
of elemental matter,
big as a milk-filled, cereal bowl
set on a limitless, royal blue, silver service table.

I READ POETRY LIKE

it has one more syllable
than I can pronounce.

FOOD

The two Asian workers in the kitchen always
offer to share their food with me.
The other Caucasian waiter shares his food
as well. If it's a slow night the Chilean
chef cooks me something.

Try to borrow or lend five bucks
we all give dumb, blank stares.
Who knows where the money is going
or where it's coming from.

But this food thing is sacred.
No questions asked.
The time has come to realize this.